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EDUCATIONAL IDEALS OF 1850

JOHN M. MANLY
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Few things are more remarkable in the history of human culture than the length of time often required to secure the adoption in practice of ideas which even on their first statement commend themselves to every intelligent man as not only true but of immense practical benefit to the community. Many notable examples of this difficulty are furnished by the history of education; but no more striking instance can be found than one illustrated in the following letter. Every educated man knows from his own experience that the process of education is fruitless and vain until it becomes for the student himself a process of active, vital co-operation with the forces, personal and impersonal, which are striving to educate him. Everyone knows that the whole problem of education is not the infusion into a passive mind of a more or less extensive and more or less useful mass of organized information, but the awakening of the mind to activity and the training of it in effective and fruitful methods of study. And yet, even today, a large body of so-called teachers regard their functions as properly fulfilled when they have presented their subject clearly and forcibly and ascertained what percentage of the expected acquisition each student has obtained. Years ago, as the following letter shows, thinking men had reached the conclusion that the teacher's proper function is to teach, not to act as an education gauger.

Of the persons concerned in the letter one is well known to all America. J. L. M. Curry, later a distinguished legislator, diplomat, and educational leader, best known as ambassador to Spain and general agent of the Peabody Fund and the Slater Fund, was, at the date of the letter, a promising young lawyer and a member of the Alabama legislature. H. E. Taliaferro (pronounced "Toliver") was a warm personal friend of Mr. Curry, a man of fine public spirit and editor of the *Alabama Baptist*. The writer of the letter, Dr. Basil Manly, had become president of the University of

Alabama in 1837, and, in the fourteen years that had elapsed since then, had gathered about him a notable staff of instructors with whose aid he had given the new university a place in the foremost rank of American colleges. The educational ideals and practices of the University of Alabama were in many respects far in advance of the time—especially in the teaching of the sciences. Dr. Manly himself was widely known for the vigor and independence of his thinking, the sanity of his judgment, and for his interest in every measure for the benefit of the commonwealth. His advice on matters of education was sought, not only by the leaders of the South, but also by such men at the North as Francis Wayland of Brown University.

The community of Talladega in which it was proposed to establish the school in question was one of the most enlightened and progressive in the country. Some of its notable citizens were Mr. Walker Reynolds, a large planter, a man of cultivation and refinement and of large public spirit, Chancellor Bowie, one of the leading jurists of the South, General L. W. Lawler, later governor of Alabama, and the Welshes, the Mallorys, and others whose names are written large in the history of the state and the nation.

Why the school was not established as planned is not recorded in Dr. Manly's papers and I have no information on this point. It seems probable that the establishment of a private institution was abandoned in view of the passage of a bill for the establishment of common schools throughout the state of Alabama by the legislature of 1853. This bill, which was ardently supported by young Curry, was drawn up by Judge A. B. Meek, of Tuscaloosa, noted in his day as poet and jurist.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, October 23, 1851

Rev. H. E. Taliaferro and

J. L. M. Curry, Esq.,

Talladega, Ala.:

MY DEAR BRETHREN: As both your letters are of the same purport, you will forgive my using the absorbing nature of my engagements as a reason for replying to both at once.

The object is a noble one; it is a benefaction to a people to raise and maintain a High School, greater in pecuniary value than 25 per cent added to the value of all their property within five miles of its location; but in its bearing on the minds and morals—the highest welfare of the rising generations for

all the period of its continuance and, with regard to some, for all existence—confers *incalculable* benefits.

If the state were in a condition to organize and support a proper system of public schools, in all the varied gradations and dependencies, *for the whole population*, there are some advantages connected with such a system that plead strong for it; and perhaps ought to induce us as patriots to forego the establishment of schools by individual effort,—at least till the other system has been tried and found a failure. But there is no reason to think that the state will be in a condition for generations to come, to enter appropriately on such a work. The only resource is to found and maintain schools by individual effort and enterprise.

What are called denominational schools should be rightly understood. They are not *sectarian*. Literature and science are not sectarian, and cannot by any artifice or device be tortured into the encouragement of illiberal or bigoted measures. But as it is important that a religious element should be infused into every educational establishment, and as each denomination works more harmoniously and steadily and peaceably when working by itself, in things within its power, denominational schools have been wisely resorted to,—not to teach sectarian doctrines nor to lay the insinuating hand of proselytism on every thing that passes under its shadow, but to shed the genial influence of our common Christianity on all alike, who wish to pursue liberal studies. When such schools are established by different denominations, convenience of abode will produce many interchanges of patronage, while the principles of reciprocity (and possibly the power to retaliate) will keep each steadily attending to its proper vocation.

It is an incidental advantage to a denomination to have such a school under its care, as it more perfectly draws out their energies, unites and concentrates their productive ability, gives mutual support and confidence, establishes a visible tangible center of power, and throws weight and consideration into every public movement, both local and general. It is not possible for a denomination to retain its own proper grade of equality among others who support schools, while itself has none. If Probaptists have High Schools, Baptists must have High Schools—why as man and woman will come together and make one—it may be sufficient at first, by way of compromise, and as a “fair divide” for Baptists to have High Schools for boys. Even this, if left wholly to you in Talladega, will be only an approximation to equity, for the girls will have all the “shine” to themselves—*there* will be the lavish expenditures, all the eager solicitudes, all the popular excitement—and the boys will inevitably flock (both old boys and young boys) to the places where the girls congregate.

Besides, those who are to be the mothers of the next generation will inevitably control the religious denominational preferences of their children. For the first ten years of life the mother has exclusive control, and even after that the father seldom interferes with the religious direction previously given to the thoughts and feelings of the child by the mother. So that, whether we

regard *immediate* or remote *results*, it seems to me that Baptist institutions for both sexes must go on, *pari passu* with those of other denominations, and are indispensable to denominational equality and success.

Schools for girls are taking, too much, the character of tinsel and superficialness. Sound elementary instruction is despised and slid over with haste and neglect; and that first and most necessary of all teaching is almost unattempted (uncultivated, indeed) i.e. the teaching of the child *how to study*, how to use its powers in the requisition and digestion of Knowledge.

A school, in my judgment, should be so arranged that every class (of course every individual pupil) should study in the *presence* and with the *aid* of the teacher. The *Head* should be a *man*, of comprehensive executive ability, and females can be largely and most advantageously employed for subordinate parts, certainly for all the juvenile classes—and usually when their education and talents are adequate to make a decided impression. They have no feeling of rivalry, no aspirations to Headship, no private favor to seek; they just know how to obey orders and carry out the wishes of the principal; they may be employed at half the cost of men, and thus numbers may be received for carrying out the plan of teaching a pupil *how to study*, as above suggested; while if the principal has but little of class instruction thrown on him, he can perambulate the halls and apartments, throw his presence and energy into every room, secure discipline and order, and educe every description of talent which either the teacher or the taught may have.

Schools, as I see them, have practically resolved themselves into establishments for receiving the evidence of the fidelity and success with which *someone at home* (usually the mother) has imparted knowledge to the pupil. The *true teacher* is some *nameless* one in domestic retirement, not on the list of the "Faculty," as published in the annual exhibit. If that private teacher is a good one, the child is *well taught*; and if those home lessons are, for any reason, omitted, the child, as to so much, is for all useful purposes *untaught*. This is my experience, and my observation brings out the same results as to the children of others. My sending to school, when analyzed and reduced to its elements, is this: paying a high price to a professional and *professed* teacher, in order to oblige myself and wife to be very punctual and exact in *doing the labor* of teaching our children and then going once a year or so to see others very complacently and with all due flourish receive the credit of it.

Now give me a teacher "as is a teacher," if you please. Till a pupil has acquired the art and habit of close, patient, intelligent and successful study—so as to be left alone without injury, let every lesson be got in the presence and with the instant directing and prompting of a teacher whose attention for the time is not devoted to any other object; let the periods of attention to one subject be divided into such portions of the aggregate school time as may suit the general plan of the school and the number of studies embraced in the courses of the several classes (we will suppose forty-five minutes to each); let the first two-thirds of this time be devoted by teacher and pupils to the thorough acquisition of the lesson, everyone being kept on the *qui vive* by the

keen and active method of the teacher; and then let the latter third be devoted to testing the promptness and accuracy of their several acquisitions, taking care to sound the younger, feebler, and slower minds for the purpose of waking up the laggards. Then let this class file out of one door into another room, to undergo the same process with another subject under another teacher, while another class comes in by a different door to undergo that process in a subject new to it in this room and with the direction of this teacher.

Thus let the school shift from room to room, from subject to subject, from teacher to teacher, at regular periods marked by a bell or gong, during all the school time, without noise or crowding in the passageways or stairways; let the teachers and monitors, to secure this, take their proper positions while these transits are made, and let the buildings be constructed with rooms, passages, doors, stairways, etc., to suit the plan. I would have even composition attended to partly in this way. Give the young rogues a theme, on the instant, and require them to plunge right into it, like a terrapin into a pond, and do their best for a half-hour or three-quarters. Then the teacher can examine their productions leisurely and make the next period devoted to that kind of composition, the occasion of correcting and criticising, by himself and by the members of the class.

Oh, it is mournful to go into a school and see the waste of precious time and more precious mind by mere inanity, meeting some little difficulty and stalling and balking and flying back, till disgust and fretfulness ensue. And then, for all hist, the teacher has no remedy but a scold or a strap; and what good, pray, does this do? Thus the child is wearied, confined, and disgusted in the school room, and when it comes home, there is no rest, no recreation, no relief to the bent and oppressed spirit. The mother's voice, which should be like a balm to the soul, hurries the poor child at meals, hurries it from bed, hurries it to lessons, tortures and harasses it all the time and makes home irksome, while the father's stern look of disappointment if he scrutinizes the child's acquirements, is like the "iron entering into the soul." You call this education, do you?

For advanced pupils that know how to study, side seats may be provided in the rooms, if need be, where this system of studying and teaching is going on. They will not be interrupted and it is important that they should cultivate the habit of close application, regardless of the presence or different employments of others in the same room; and they can be heard at convenient periods and in the proper rooms, especially when the juvenile squads are in recess.

This general idea, reduced to its practical details, has been my ideal of a school ever since I could reflect maturely on the subject. I never saw it attempted. I have wished most heartily to see it done. I have done it, in a small way, in my own family and this is practically the way that all family teaching is done. But not many months past, I found the details of an actual school system that has reduced to practice all my favorite theory: it is that of the Central High School of Philadelphia, under the management of John S. Hart. While I was busy in New York this summer, I got Professor Garland

to go there and see its actual operation for a day or two, and become familiar with its details. He is all admiration, as I expected, and says that he should ask no greater privilege on this earth, of that kind, than to reside where he might enjoy for his children the benefit of that school. It is a part of the public school system of the city and county of Philadelphia, and the wealthiest men place their children in the free schools, in their several gradations, that they may become eligible at the proper age to admission into the High School, which is also free.

I see you are all under the excitement of a "bright idea"—How shall we get such a school in Talladega? As I do not know your professional teachers, candidates, etc., whether they have the nerve and the good sense to comprehend and execute a beneficent scheme like this, I will just make a suggestion. I have a young married man in my eye that I think might go to Philadelphia, see the working of the school of Mr. Hart, become familiar with its details, get a plan for buildings to suit the actual working of your intended Seminary, engage a part of his teachers familiar with his plans (the remainder to be supplied at home), and having worked himself into an enthusiasm, let him come home and *go to work*. I think he will do. Do you ask who he is? It is Jabez L. M. Curry, Esq., of Talladega.

Now I have done the best I can for you. You are welcome to do as much better than this as you can.

God grant you good success in all good things.

Affectionately,

B. MANLY

They have an iron chair with broad writing tablet before, and an inkstand fitted into it, capable of being closed by a valve. These are made in Providence, R.I. Dr. Wayland has his lecture rooms supplied with them. They cost 3.623 each. They are worth all they cost, can be firmly fixed to the floor. Jordan L. Mott, of New York City, has iron school furniture for smaller scholars. There are desks for a side of the room, of most convenient arrangement and fixtures, and there are iron chairs with a good support to the back; the seat and back turning around on a pivot, permitting each to leave his seat without clambering over a bench or disturbing another. These also can be firmly fixed to the floor. I could tell you a *thousand* things but I have not time to write them. Farewell.

A man of right energies who would go to work in the right way, might regenerate the whole system of education in the South, besides making a fortune for himself. The pupils of Mr. Hart's school are sought for, and they command higher wages than any other young men for every department of business. They have 600 in the school, and could have 1,000 if they had room. They intend to make the room and not to have any limit of members but that of the youthful population of the city capable of admission and of using the privileges of the school. Again Farewell,

B. MANLY